

Difficulties Implementing CLT in South Korea: Mismatch between the language policy and what is taking place in the classroom

Aja Dailey, University of Birmingham, November 2010

Module 5 Assessment Task

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There is often a mismatch between higher level language policy and its implementation in the classroom.

Describe some of these mismatches (either from the literature and/or from your own experience) and discuss whether such mismatches can ever be resolved.

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1. INTRODUCTION

To compete in the global economy, East Asian governments believe that it is essential to increase the number of people in their population who can communicate efficiently in English (Littlewood, 2007: 243). English is seen as playing a significant role in “promoting international exchange, acquiring scientific knowledge and technological expertise, fostering economic progress, and participating in international competition” (Ross, 1992 cited in Hu, 2002b: 93). Governments have answered this necessity by making changes to the English curriculum to include a more communicative approach to language teaching. Despite being an advanced innovation in language teaching, many countries in Asia have been unsuccessful introducing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in their English classes (Carless, 2003: 485-486).

Governments have put pressure on schools and teachers to implement CLT in order to develop communicative competence for the next generation (Shin, 2007). However, there has been a mismatch between the governmental mandates and what is actually being implemented in the schools (Carless, 2003; Nunan, 2003). Consequently, teachers are accused of paying ‘lip-service’ by telling the government that they are following CLT, when in actuality they are sticking to their comfortable traditional methods (Hu, 2002b: 94).

This paper will discuss a similar mismatch between the South Korean government requesting a more communicative approach to be implemented in the classroom and the realities of what is taking place in these English classes. By exploring modifications in the English language curriculum, Korean teachers’ current understanding and beliefs of the method, and cultural

factors in Korea, I will investigate what is causing this mismatch, and whether such a mismatch can be resolved to successfully implement CLT or at least a more communicative approach in Korean classrooms.

Similar mismatches have been documented in Japan (Samimy and Kobayashi, 2004), China (Hu, 2002a, 2002b), and Hong Kong (Carless, 1999, 2003), which can be seen as broader cultural tendencies (Carless, 1999) so comparisons to other countries in Asia will be made when relevant.

2. 'ENGLISH FEVER' IN KOREA

The passion for education in South Korea and the explosion of 'English Fever' can be contributed to the academic values founded on the tradition of Confucian education (Lee, 2006: 6). A great respect for education has been a value of Confucian education for years, not only through intellect, but also through moral qualities (Hu, 2002b: 97). This enthusiasm for education can be seen in the developments of English education throughout the years.

The need to speak English seriously became an issue when South Korea started to become a more international country, by hosting the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympics (Park, 2009). Another factor that enhanced this desire to speak English was the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Jeon, 2009). The economic crisis throughout Asia caused South Korea to recognize English as a way to develop their international market and rebuild their economy (ibid).

The Korean Ministry of Education (MoE) (2008: 41) states in the curriculum that,

“To contribute to the nation and society, to show leadership as a cosmopolitan citizen, and to enjoy a wide range of cultural activities, the ability to understand and use English is essential. The ability to communicate in English will act as an important bridge connecting different countries, and will be the driving force in developing our country, forming trust among various countries and cultures”.

The historical events combined with the status of English as a global language, has encouraged the South Korean government to put a high importance on English education (Li, 1998: 681) and has subsequently made considerable efforts to implement CLT through changes in the English curriculum (Yoon, 2004: 2).

2.1 CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENTS

The Korean government, specifically former President of Korea, Kim Young-Sam, "...urg[ed] the MoE to shift from traditional grammar instruction to a communicative English curriculum" (Shin, 2007: 77). Realizing that the grammatical syllabus that was originally in place did not develop students' ability to communicate effectively, (Li, 1998: 681) the government developed the *Sixth National Curriculum* in 1995, which focused on fluency and communicative competence in English, which has been carried over to the *Seventh National Curriculum* as well (Shin, 2007). The purpose of this innovation is '...to develop the learners' communicative competence in English through meaningful drills and communicative activities' (Development Committee, 1992: 180 cited in Li, 1998: 682). The main goal of English education in Korea is simply to advance the ability to communicate in English (Ministry of Education, 2008: 42).

In addition to the curriculum change, in 1995 the Korean government drastically lowered the age at which English is first learned in school, from first grade middle school to third grade elementary school (Jeong, 2004). Starting English in third grade and ultimately making English a standard school subject in 1997 brought about 'English fever' in Korea (Jeong, 2004), causing Koreans to become obsessed with learning English (Shin, 2007). So obsessed, according to Park, Koreans spent nearly \$15 billion on English education in 2005 (Park, 2009). This included

sending their children to after school English academies, private tutoring, English camps, and sending their children abroad to study (ibid).

Additionally, The MoE has recently initiated a nationwide policy called 'Teaching English in English' (2010: 10). This policy is in place to strengthen the quality of the actual English classes while helping students improve their communicative competence (Park and Lee, 2006: 244). These changes within the curriculum and language policies demonstrate that Korea is focusing their education to a more communicative approach in line with the MoE's (2008: 43) stated curriculum aim to "...cultivate the basic ability to understand and use English in everyday life".

2.2 STUDYING ABROAD

Students who study abroad to learn English pay an enormous amount of money to do so. Jeon and Lee (2006) state that in 2005 there were 16,446 elementary, middle school, and high school students from Korea studying abroad, and in that year, \$3 billion was spent on their education overseas. Shin (2007) suggests, there has been an increase in the number of Korean students who study overseas hoping to develop a good command of English. According to Park, in 2006, more than 35,000 elementary and secondary students went abroad that year to study (Park, 2009:53). A significant number of Korea's youth are educated abroad and large sums of money are being spent outside of Korea (Jeon, 2009).

The economic loss caused by students studying abroad resulted in the MoE designing a 'Five Year Plan for English Education Revitalization', aiming that by 2010 there would be a native-English teacher in each middle school and eventually in every elementary and high school throughout the nation (Jeon and Lee, 2006). Jeon and Lee (2006 cited in Jeon, 2009: 235) argue that this policy was put in place

“...as a result of the significant economic loss incurred by sending students abroad to study and as a response to increasing criticism about and mistrust of the public English education system among Koreans”.

The reasoning behind the plan was that by bringing in native speakers, students would be given more English input, authentic language, and cultural understanding (Jeon, 2009). This suggests that the aim of this policy is not only to introduce native speakers into the classroom to increase English input and communicative competence, but also to persuade parents and students to stay in Korea for their education (Jeon and Lee, 2006: 57).

3. DIFFICULTIES IMPLEMENTING CLT IN KOREAN CLASSROOMS

Regardless of a more communicative approach to the English language policy and efforts to bring over native-English teachers, there still seems to be a mismatch between what the government wants and what the teachers are teaching. Shin (2007: 83) points out that in Korea,

“...the goal for English education implied in the government’s policy (i.e. improving students’ oral conversational abilities to foster national competitiveness in a global market) was not congruent with the English teachers’ immediate goals for English education (i.e. understanding and supporting students and facilitating a broader scope of learning experiences for them)”.

Shin (2007) argues here that there is a disagreement between the government and teachers concerning the methods of how English should be taught. This implies that the teachers and government are not on the same page regarding the goals of English education, resulting in the failure to implement CLT in Korean schools. Even though the Korean government wants to implement a more communicative approach to English teaching, teachers appear to be slow in adopting communicative techniques (Kim, 2004: 2). This suggests that there is a large mismatch between what the government requires from the English curriculum and what is actually happening in the classrooms.

In this section, I will discuss some of the reasons why this mismatch is happening and why CLT has struggled to become a popular method for teaching English in Korea: the importance of the entrance exams, misunderstandings of the method, teachers' lack of confidence in their English abilities, and cultural characteristics that make it difficult to implement CLT.

As a means for clarification, I will be defining the characteristics of CLT as given by Savignon (1983 cited in Samimy and Kobayashi, 2004: 248).

“[T]he tenets of CLT commonly include a focus on meaning, a focus on communicative functions, the use of authentic tasks, the use of authentic materials, learner-centered perspectives, an emphasis on the needs and interests of the learner, the use of group or pair activities, and the importance of a secure, nonthreatening atmosphere”.

3.1 AN EXAM-BASED CULTURE

Seth argues that due to the importance of education in Korean culture, Korea has become “the most exam-obsessed culture in the world” (2002: 5). These entrance exams represent more than just education. Seth (2002: 140) states that the

“...examination system illustrates the importance of education as a determiner of social status, the Korean concern with rank and status, and the universal desire for and belief in the possibility of upward mobility”.

It appears that this exam system controls the future success and status of the lives of Korean students. These test scores are extremely important to enter college and for future employment (Jeon, 2009: 232). This puts a huge amount of pressure on the students and parents to prepare and succeed on the exam (Kim and Dembo, 2000).

The English section of The College Scholastic Ability Test, which has been the national college entrance exam since 1993, introduced a listening comprehension part to compliment the reading comprehension section (Shin, 2007: 77), which is an improvement from the previous grammar-

based examinations (Li, 1998: 692). In addition, the MoE states that the points on the listening tests will increase from 34 percent to 50 percent by 2013 (2010: 4). Jeong (2004) claims that this addition to the exam has changed the educational priorities from the grammar-translation approach to wanting more communicative English.

However, even though the government has established a listening part to the exam, and that Koreans are becoming aware of how important it is to communicate rather than know grammar well (Li, 1998:690), a communicative approach to teaching is still considered less important (Park and Lee, 2006: 244). It is believed that this method does not fully prepare the students for the exam (Littlewood, 2007) due to the absence of an oral aptitude test (Park and Lee, 2006: 244).

Students and parents require teachers to help them pass these exams, therefore the communicative approach is not considered helpful in achieving this goal. (Gorsuch, 2000: 686). Furthermore, parents and students know that speaking skills are not tested on the exam, and for that reason, expect the teacher to prepare them for other sections instead (Li, 1998: 692). Teachers are thus in a difficult situation. On the one hand, they are being pressured from the government to implement a more communicative approach, but on the other, they have to meet the demands from students and parents to teach in a more examination-oriented way (Shim and Baik, 2004 cited in Littlewood, 2007: 245).

In my experience, being the native-teacher in my middle school, I am expected to teach communicatively. However, because I am not teaching grammar or translation, it seems that the students do not think of me as a real teacher. Jeon (2009: 239) points out a similar situation in

which a native-teacher in South Korea reported that her students, "...did not consider her English class a real class, because what she taught was not on their tests".

Consequently, the entrance exams have caused a large mismatch between the demands of the government's language policy and what is being taught in the classroom. It seems that the pressure coming from the authority, for schools and teachers to implement a more communicative approach (Jeong, 2004) cannot compete with the needs coming from students and parents requesting the teaching of grammar, translation, and reading skills (Li, 1998). It appears that the government is altering certain elements of the educational curriculum without considering the other components of the education system as a whole. Because these exams are so important, the implementation of CLT will come second to the tests even though the language policy demands a communicative approach.

3.2 TEACHERS' MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Teachers in Korea seem to be having a difficult time applying a more communicative approach in their classrooms, which appears to be caused by uncertainty regarding the methods of CLT (Gorsuch, 2000; Kirkgoz, 2008; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007; Thompson, 1996). These misconceptions have caused teachers to question the method and continue teaching using traditional approaches (Kim, 2004: 2).

The two most common misconceptions of CLT are that it does not teach grammar and that it means teaching only speaking (Thompson, 1996; Wu, 2008). However, this is inaccurate in that grammar is considered to be necessary to insure efficient communication and that communication can be learned not only through speaking, but reading and writing as well (Thompson, 1996). Li (1998: 689) reported that this misunderstanding

“...led the teachers to believe that CLT contradicted their beliefs about language learning and did not allow them to prepare students for the various exams that are critical to their future careers. For that reason, the teachers refused to accept CLT”.

The importance of the entrance exams in Korea, combined with these misunderstandings, has made teachers apprehensive to accept CLT as an appropriate teaching method. Carless (1998) states that full understanding of the purpose and how to apply the new innovation in the classrooms are crucial in ensuring successful implementation. Without a complete understanding and proper training about the benefits of CLT and techniques of how it should be taught, there will undoubtedly be misconceptions about the method, and rejection to implement the approach altogether (Wu, 2008: 51).

These misconceptions can be seen as symptoms of the mismatch between government policy and its classroom implementation. If teachers do not properly understand the nature of the approach that they are expected to adopt, this can only be because the message is not being clearly passed down through the management hierarchy to the teachers at the bottom. As the message is most likely to be sent through training and instruction, it seems likely that the government is not effectively training the teachers or the teachers are not getting enough experience to implement the method confidently.

3.3 LACK OF CONFIDENCE

Another reason why CLT has not been terribly successful in Korea is because teachers feel that they are not proficient enough in English to teach in a communicative way. Jeong states that this is because the education and training that the teachers have obtained, focused on grammar-translation rather than communicative competence (2004: 41). Li argues that teachers feel they are highly qualified regarding English grammar, reading, and writing (1998: 686). However,

when it came to speaking and listening, the teachers do not feel their abilities are “...adequate to conduct the communicative classes necessarily involved in CLT” (ibid). Consequently, many teachers become frustrated since they do not possess the necessary communicative qualities being demanded by the government and society (Jeong, 2004: 41).

This lack of proficiency in English is a major obstacle to the Korean government’s ‘Teaching English in English’ policy discussed earlier. Most teachers in public schools do not have the proficiency to teach all four language skills in English (Jeong, 2004: 41) even though the new policy stresses so.

I can see this in my own teaching context where in my middle school there are two Korean English teachers. One of the teachers is a competent user of English and is able to mostly teach English through English in his classes. The other teacher cannot communicate in English and consequently, teaching English in English and using CLT in her classroom is simply not an option. Even the teacher who teaches in English cannot fully do so because the students sometimes do not understand, causing him to revert back to Korean.

This shows a further mismatch between the government demanding a more communicative approach to teaching by implementing the policy ‘Teaching English in English’ and how the teachers are actually applying this innovation in class. This implies that not all teachers are capable or willing to completely implement the policy because of the lack of proficiency from themselves and/or the students.

3.4 PERSONAL AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Teachers’ beliefs play a pivotal role in the implementation process. Orafi and Borg (2009: 244) point out that “...new curricula are often not implemented as planned because of

unacknowledged mismatches between their principles and teachers' beliefs...". This indicates that teachers' beliefs are preventative factors of why CLT is being rejected in Korea. As I mentioned earlier, Shin (2007) argues that the teacher's goals of English education in Korea and the government's goals do not match, causing the implementation to fail. Furthermore, Wagner (1991 cited in Kirkgoz, 2008: 1860) argues that if the innovation and teachers' beliefs are not in sync,

“...teachers will tend to interpret innovative ideas in light of their own theories to conform to their own teaching style, which means that new ideas will not be implemented, as intended by the curriculum planners.”

This implies that the teacher's will alter their methods based on their beliefs of what and how English should be taught regardless of the government's expectations and language policy.

These differences in beliefs of language teaching and values stem from the fact that this is a Western method trying to be implemented in an Asian context (Carless, 1999), as well as the reality that South Korea is from what Biggs (1996a cited in Carless, 1999: 240) termed as the 'Confucian Heritage Culture' (CHC). Education has been seen as a tool for gaining knowledge rather than using knowledge for a purpose (Hu, 2002b: 97). Confucian education encourages socially acceptable models and collectivism, but opposes individuality, personal goals, and self-expression (ibid). The educational values of CHC seem to contradict what CLT stands for, thus preventing CLT from being implemented in these countries (Carless, 1999; Hu 2002b; Samimy and Kobayashi, 2004; Wang and Cheng, 2005).

The traditional text and grammar-centered methods of teaching English are not complemented by the student-centered, fluency-based, and problem-solving activities imposed by CLT (Butler, 2005: 424), causing teachers to continue teaching the way they believe is best. This mismatch

between teachers' beliefs and the curricular philosophies is a major hindrance to the implementation of CLT (Orafi and Borg, 2009: 244). Because of these entrenched beliefs toward education, teachers in Korea have been reluctant to teach communicatively.

3.4.1 TEACHERS' ROLE

CLT has changed the teacher's role in Korea from being the leading authority figure in the classroom to that of a facilitator of communication (Carless, 1999). This has been difficult for Korean teachers to accept seeing as though through their culture's eyes, teachers are seen as the 'knower,' and students are expected to respect and not challenge them (ibid).

Consequently, in Confusion cultures it is difficult for "...teachers and students to accept any pedagogical practice that tends to put teachers on a par with their students and detracts from teacher authority" (Hu, 2002b: 99). Instead, the teachers continue to teach what is comfortable and culturally acceptable (grammar-translation method and audiolingualism) because these approaches offer teachers full control of the classroom and what is being learned (Hu, 2002b: 100). Furthermore, these methods are less demanding on the teachers' language proficiency and pedagogic techniques (Carless, 1999: 250), which prevents the teachers from 'losing face' due to not being able to immediately answer students' questions correctly (Li, 1998: 687).

Likewise, the role-reversal between teachers and students has brought up apprehensions regarding the implementation of CLT. CLT encourages students to take control of their own learning by engaging in pair work to develop ideas, solve problems and provide knowledge and skills in a non-threatening environment (Thompson, 1996: 13). The MoE has stated that to learn English, students should become the center of the classes (2008: 42). This method is unfamiliar to the teacher-centered method Korea has been accustomed to (Kim, 2004: 8). Allowing the

class to be student-centered and working in small groups is a concern for teachers, not only because the role of the teacher becomes unfamiliar, but also because in this culture, the teacher is expected to have complete control over the situation (Hu, 2002b: 99), and when students are working together in groups, this control no longer exists (Littlewood, 2007: 244).

The traditional Confucian education and beliefs have made it difficult for teachers and students to accept and successfully implement CLT. Additionally, differences in educational aims and role reversals have been factors to the ineffective implementation of CLT.

4. RESOLUTIONS

As mentioned above, the importance of entrance exams, misunderstandings of CLT, teachers' lack of confidence in their English abilities, and cultural considerations have posed challenges in adopting CLT in Korea despite pressure being put on by the government. This section will explore whether or not Korea can resolve these issues to ensure successful implementation of CLT.

4.1 INCREASING TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE AND CONFIDENCE IN THE METHOD

The key to effective implementation is the teacher. If the teacher does not understand the method and what the innovation is aimed to accomplish, there will be hesitations and inevitably failure (Wang and Cheng, 2005: 20). On the other hand, if teachers fully understand the method, believe in it, and are confident in applying it, there may be success.

The MoE has taken steps in ensuring this success by providing training programs throughout education offices and universities (Jo, 2008: 381) and organizing local education committees to

provide teachers with in-service training programs (Jo, 2008: 378). Specifically, the MoE announced in 2009 that they would provide 1,500 English teachers with choice-based training programs to fit their needs and “...select and train 5,000 English speaking instructors so as to meet the demands according to the increase of English instruction hours at primary schools as well as level-differentiated classes at secondary schools” (Ministry of Education, 2009: 8-9).

Some other ideas of training have included Carless (1998) suggesting that “on- and off-site training” would ensure support from their school management and the development of teachers’ needs. Kirkgoz (2008) points out that the training needs to be continuous in order for teachers to develop their methods and update their knowledge concerning the implementation, and in these training seminars, teachers need the opportunity to gain a full understanding of the new curriculum innovation, learn new approaches to presenting the content, and new means of interacting with students (ibid).

What is not mentioned here is the experience needed to apply CLT comfortably and confidently in the classroom. It seems that the MoE is providing efficient training to teachers, but the issue is whether the teachers are getting enough experience practicing the method themselves before implementing it in the classroom.

With this continuous training and support, teachers should eventually feel more comfortable and confident implementing CLT in their classrooms. However, all one can do is give teachers the right tools to apply the method effectively, but whether the teachers accept and apply the new method is entirely up to them.

4.2 COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE TESTED IN EXAMS

As stated before, arguably the biggest hindrance of implementing CLT are the national entrance exams. These exams determine the future for Korean students and it is not surprising why they and teachers take these exams so seriously. Li (1984: 13) points out that, "...the examination is the piper that calls the tune. Perhaps the tide will turn only when language testing has changed its focus".

The tide has turned and as I discussed before, we can see some real changes taking place in the English section of these entrance exams. With the addition of the listening comprehension section of the test, parents have begun urging their children to improve their listening skills and both students and parents have changed their views to focus on communicative competence instead of grammar (Park, 2009: 52).

Another development comes from the MoE stating that they will continue efforts developing a national English proficiency test. (Ministry of Education, 2009: 8). This test will be used as material for employment, studying abroad, and college admission and will include reading, listening, speaking, and writing sections (ibid). A similar development was reported by the Korea Times (2010), describing a new exam called The National English Ability Test (NEAT), which is scheduled to replace the English section of the university entrance exam in 2016. The NEAT will include reading, writing, listening, and speaking sections of the test (ibid). I am uncertain whether these are the same developments, nonetheless, Korea seems to be making progress towards a more communicative exam.

I am unsure the means in which speaking skills will be tested on the NEAT, however, to ensure implementation of CLT, Korea needs to make speaking English a high priority on the exams. If

it is not deemed relevant, the teachers and students will continually focus solely on grammar, translation, and listening and reading comprehension.

4.3 CULTURAL OBSTACLES

Teachers have been pressured to implement CLT into their classrooms, though, being as this is a Western method developed for Western countries and cultures (Littlewood, 2007: 245), Korean teachers have been apprehensive to apply it. Szulc-Kurpaska (1996 cited in Nunan, 2003: 591) states that,

“...ministries of education are framing policies and implementing practices in the language area without adequately considering the implications of such policies and practices on the lives of the teachers and students they affect”.

Language planners must take into account the complications that might occur with implementing new policies, particularly ideas from other educational settings. Adopting western approaches might not be the best remedy, especially if the imported method may not transfer from culture to culture (Carless, 1999: 238). An analogy by Holliday (1994 cited in Carless, 1999: 238) compares the unsuccessful implementation of Western methods in Asian contexts as, ‘tissue-rejection’,

“...when a transplanted organ (or in educational terms innovation) does not become an effectively functioning part of the system to which it is implanted, due to a failure to mesh the respective characteristics of ‘donor’ and ‘receiver’”.

Korea must develop their own teaching methods that fit their culture, educational needs and beliefs. As Li (1998: 698) points out,

“...EFL countries may be better off developing methods in their own contexts. Rather than relying on expertise, methodology, and materials controlled and dispensed by Western ESL countries, EFL countries should strive to establish their own research contingents and encourage methods specialists and classroom teachers to develop language teaching methods that take into account the political, economic, social, and cultural factors and, most important of all, the EFL situations in their countries”.

Instead of throwing themselves into the hysteria of CLT, Korea needs to step back and carefully study their TEFL situations and decide how CLT can best serve the needs of their students and teachers (Li, 1998: 696).

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed how the Korean government has been taking actions in changing the English curriculum to develop communicative competence in their students for political and economic gains now and in the future. The government has been pressuring teachers to implement a more communicative approach to their English curriculum believing that this will enhance the ability to communicate in English (Ministry of Education, 2008). However, there have been apprehensions from teachers to implement this method because of the exam-culture, misunderstandings and lack of confidence from teachers, as well as cultural matters. This mismatch between what the government requests and what method the teachers are implementing, suggests that there are different priorities between the two and further actions need to be taken in order to bring the sides together.

Korea has taken large measures to ensure that their students will be able to communicate in English by providing their teachers with the necessary training needed as well as making alterations to the entrance exams to make it more communicative. Korea must continue to support these changes that are being made to the English section of the entrance exams to guarantee the importance of communicative competence. Korea must also make sure that all, not

just urban, English teachers are properly trained in all aspects of the innovation, including the actual experience of using CLT. Nevertheless, this is a Western method that is trying to be adopted in an Asian context and it may be beneficial for Korea to research and develop an appropriate communicative method to coincide with their culture and the desires of their students, parents, and teachers.

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